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DEPT FOR DRL/IRF WCOFSKY

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [OPRC](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: INITIAL ALGERIAN REACTION TO IRFR MOSTLY NEGATIVE

REF: STATE 99226

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) We delivered the 2008 International Religious Freedom Country Report (IRFR) on September 23 during a meeting with MFA North America Deputy Director Rachid Ouali. Ouali gave no substantive comment on the IRFR, despite numerous critical official statements in the Algerian press in reaction to the report. We informed Ouali that we were prepared to discuss the report's conclusions in greater detail with the ministry. While local press coverage on September 21-22 of the release of the 2008 IRFR primarily featured official criticism of the report's findings, some reporting called into question the government's record on religious freedom. Algerian officials from state institutions and government-affiliated religious organizations publicly rejected as biased the IRFR's conclusion that respect for religious freedom had declined in Algeria.

12. (SBU) In a September 21 interview in the Arabic-language daily Echourouk el-Youmi, Algerian Muslim Scholars Association President Abdelrahman Chibane stated that the U.S. should be the last country to give lessons in democracy, human rights and minority rights, given its record in Iraq and Afghanistan. Farouk Ksentini, president of the National Advisory Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (the government human rights commission), called the report "unfounded" in comments to the Arabic-language daily El Bilad. Ksentini added that Algerian society was naturally tolerant and he attributed the report's critique of the government's religious freedom record to Algeria's "mishandling of the Habiba (Kouider) case."

13. (C) The most scathing criticism of the report came from Minister of Religious Affairs Bouabdellah Ghoulamallah. In remarks to the press on September 22, Ghoulamallah challenged the accuracy of the IRFR and asserted that there was no evidence to substantiate claims that the government had closed churches or harmed individuals because of their religious affiliation. He admitted that legal authorities had confronted "some foreigners" whose conduct violated Algerian law. Ghoulamallah accused the U.S. of not allowing Muslim religious workers to enter the U.S. and questioned whether Algeria should have to tolerate the evangelization of its nationals, especially since evangelists are "tied up in sects and even Catholic and Protestant churches have disassociated themselves from them." Switching to a more positive tone, Ghoulamallah reiterated that "Christians residing in Algeria, either as a visitor or Algerian nationals, can be assured that their freedom of worship is guaranteed." We told Rachid Ouali at the MFA on September 23 that Ghoulamallah's comments were unhelpful and not reassuring.

14. (SBU) Other reactions to the report came from opposition Socialist Forces Front (FFS) Human Rights Secretary Ahmed Betatache, who told Algerie News on September 21 that religious freedoms are not the only freedoms that have declined in Algeria. Betatache said freedom of expression also suffered and cited the Habiba Kouider case as the best example of the government's religious freedom transgressions.

In a September 21 article in the French-language daily Liberte journalist Azzeddine Bensouiah criticized the government's de facto expulsion of Pastor Hugh Johnson.

PEARCE